

From the  
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OLD ARABI, LISTED ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER  
OF HISTORIC PLACES IN 1998, CONTAINS THE LARGEST CONCENTRATION  
OF HISTORIC BUILDINGS IN ST. BERNARD PARISH.

## Can-Do Attitude Helps Rebuild Old Arabi

Text and photos by Liz Russell  
Historic Building Recovery Grant Program

Downriver from the Orleans Parish line and just past Jackson Barracks in St. Bernard Parish, Old Arabi was once the outer limit of New Orleans. This area developed in the 19th century as the city expanded beyond Faubourg Marigny, Bywater and Holy Cross.

Then known as Stock Landing, the area came into existence because New Orleans passed an ordinance in the 1870s that forbade the “landing and slaughtering” of livestock within city limits and gave exclusive privilege to the Crescent City Livestock Landing & Slaughterhouse Company, provided they operate under regulations to make the business more sanitary and efficient. Soon after, the lower boundary of Orleans Parish was redefined and moved upriver to just below Jackson Barracks. A group of New Orleans butchers appealed the State’s 1872 court decision on constitutional grounds, but the Supreme Court upheld it.

In the 1890s, citizens renamed the town after an Arab sheik, Arabi Pasha (Ahmed Urabi), who was much in the news at that time for his revolts against the British in his native Egypt. Allegedly, residents in the St. Bernard town, fighting to free themselves from their reliance on New Orleans, saw a kindred spirit in the Egyptian’s fight against the British.

Today the Old Arabi Historic District is comprised of portions of Angela, Mehle and Esteban streets, with

Old Arabi in 1883, Robinson Atlas, Plate 24



roughly 100 contributing buildings (meaning they add to the district’s historic integrity). The Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation’s Historic Building Recovery Grant Program awarded a total of \$598,013 to help owners rebuild 16 of these buildings and restore their neighborhood and their lives.

**EDWIN M. ROY JR.**, a lifelong resident of Arabi, and his wife Judy received a program grant for their home on Mehle Street, which Mr. Roy’s maternal grandfather (Reichert) built in 1904 near the family-owned tallow rendering works where they processed slaughterhouse byproducts into soap, candles and other products. Mr. Roy dubbed their business the “stink factory,” and he remembers the men coming into his home’s small washroom under the staircase to clean up.

The Roys made it through Hurricane Betsy as newlyweds living in the nearby St. Claude Heights subdivision just across St. Claude Avenue. “But Katrina was worse,” says Mr. Roy. Their home on Mehle was submerged in more than six feet of water for nearly a week, and the roof, interior plaster and other historic



234 Mehle St. — E.M. Roy

features were damaged. The grant helped make the house livable again, but it was the grant to his nearby business — *The St. Bernard Voice* — for which Mr. Roy is especially grateful. Founded in 1890 by his grandfather, William Roy, the weekly newspaper has been serving St. Bernard Parish for 119 years.

The building that houses the newspaper is actually a turn-of-the-century lighthouse that once stood on the levee on the river side of North Peters Street near Esteban Street. In 1912, a cave-in along the Mississippi



235 Angela St. — Kim Janneck

led to an extensive restructuring of the levee boundary. The slaughterhouse sold the lighthouse to William Roy for \$100, and mules pulled it on rolling logs to its current location. In 2005, Katrina devastated the building. Were it not for the grant, says Mr. Roy, he doesn’t think he could have restored the old lighthouse, and the historic landmark might have been lost.

**ALBERTA LEWIS** is a relative newcomer to the neighborhood, although her family has well-established St. Bernard ties and she owns three houses in Old Arabi. In Holy Cross, where she grew up, her grandfather William H. Grun had established the drug store at the corner of Dauphine and Flood streets in 1910, 13 years before the Industrial Canal was built, back when a streetcar



439-41 and 445 Angela St. — Alberta Lewis

still ran along Dauphine Street to Jackson Barracks and headed back along the levee. For years, Grun Pharmacy stood as the easternmost pharmacy of New Orleans, and St. Bernardians flocked there, not only for pharmaceuticals but also to park their buggies and hop on the streetcar. By the time the Industrial Canal was constructed, Grun Pharmacy had moved to the corner of St. Claude and Caffin avenues in Holy Cross. Mrs. Lewis remembers the blocks of tallow that were sold in the pharmacy — tallow that no doubt came from the factory that Mr. Roy remembers in Old Arabi.

Mrs. Lewis evacuated Katrina with her late husband James, taking treasured possessions and artifacts from their home at Sebastopol Plantation, located farther downriver in St. Bernard Parish. (See December 2008/January 2009 *Preservation in Print*.) Mrs. Lewis’ son, James, is also nearing completion on his home on Angela Street, a single shotgun whose Neoclassical elements are no longer hidden behind a large metal awning. Mrs. Lewis was able to weatherize the exterior of her house, repainting it the historically accurate shade of Victorian pink she found in paint scrapings on the brackets, and install a new roof system with the grant.



418 Angela St. — Oscar Becnel



450 Angela St. — Aileen Kelly



650 Angela St. — Dominique Bergeron

**KIM JANNECK** bought a house on Angela Street in 2003 at a “starting over” time for her. Recently divorced and moving on with life, she fell in love with the house, built by William Roy in 1903, as well as the neighborhood. Mr. Roy and his wife had lived here until they moved into a bigger home a few blocks away to accommodate twins who were on the way, thus leaving his father’s family home to live in his mother’s family place on Mehle.

Hurricane Katrina damaged Mrs. Janneck’s house, but its proximity to the Mississippi River actually meant that her house flooded less, with water rising just up to her hardwood floors. She got back home fairly soon after the storm, opening her large windows and French doors to allow the house to air out. The camelback addition of her shotgun was damaged, and ensuing work on the weatherboards revealed substantial termite damage in the framing. “Before [the repairs] the camelback swayed in any storm, but it is so solid right now. And it is a result of the grant. I would have never done it myself. I just wouldn’t have,” Mrs. Janneck recalls. “I was happy with my contractor and the grant process was way easier than I thought it would be. I love this neighborhood and I don’t want to live anywhere else.”

**ANGELA STREET** is home to many more Historic Building Recovery Grant projects, including the wonderful turn-of-the-century Victorian home of Claudia Kheel just two doors down from Kim Janneck. The house was built for Dr. Louis A. Meraux, who served as parish sheriff from 1924 until his death in 1938. His wife, Anita Maumas, inherited the ruins of Chateau des Fleurs, a nearby 1808 plantation home that was destroyed by fire in 1934.

Dominique Bergeron traces her family’s roots deep into St. Bernard Parish history. Only a few months before Katrina struck and with her father’s help, she had just finished a massive renovation on her newly purchased first home on Angela Street. Four years and one grant later, the house is once again in pristine condition and a testament to conscientious stewardship of the Historic Building Recovery Grant funds.

Deborah Burnett moved to New Orleans in the 1980s and lived Uptown before purchasing her house on Angela Street in 2001. Never one to let hard work stop her, she created quite a buzz in the neighborhood when she decided to repoint her piers by herself. “[The neighborhood] is a closely knit family,” she says. “I always had a bunch of retired men overseeing me.” Like many people in St. Bernard, she stayed in her home during the hurricane and was not evacuated until nine days later. The water came up to her chin inside the house. She was able to use the grant to restore the hardwood floors, wainscoting, doors and mantels, as well as restore or remill the shutters. Ms. Burnett shopped salvage stores

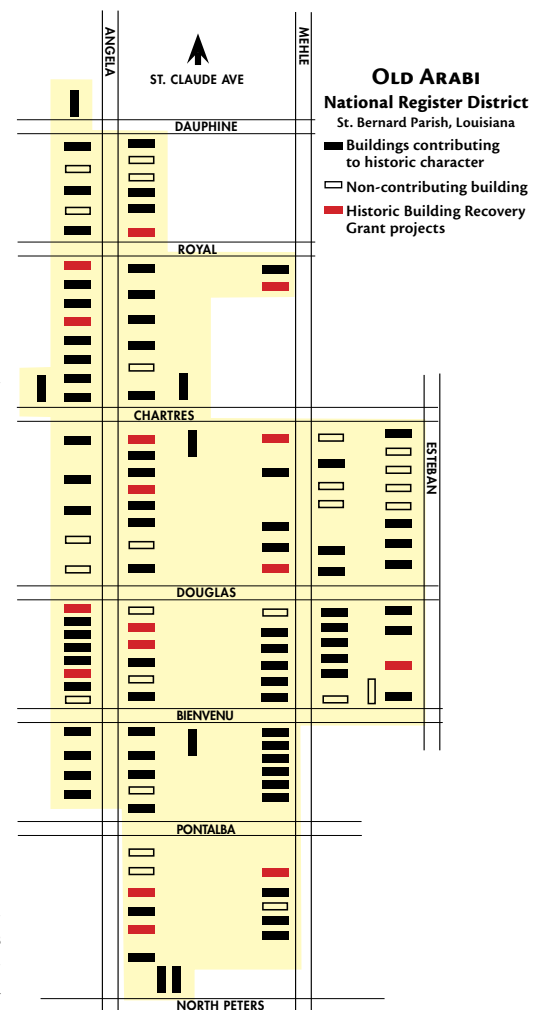
to replace many lost architectural features. She was fortunate to have skilled workers who were staying at Camp Hope in St. Bernard Parish help with the labor. “They heard there was an old hippie lady living in the neighborhood,” she recalls.

Oscar Becnel’s house sat under seven feet of water for a week. His repairs, aided by the State’s grant, exceeded expectations in terms of quality, craftsmanship and historical accuracy. “I worked really hard to keep the historic outside [intact],” he says. His home and its beautifully manicured lawn make an attractive statement along Angela Street.

Aileen Kelly’s house on Angela Street is a stylized shotgun with Colonial Revival elements that is exceptionally maintained. Among other things, she used the grant funds to restore the egg and dart detail on the porch entablature and to replace the period doorknobs on the interior of the house that were stolen after the storm. She also used mostly salvaged materials in her restoration job.

**STEPHEN LIUZZA** says that growing up in Arabi with siblings, grandparents and parents all under one roof was not his father’s wish, but his mother’s: “My father’s family was from the Quarter; he was born on Bourbon Street. But my mother always liked St. Bernard.” Six brothers and sisters grew up to remain in the area, meaning that Katrina left Mr. Liuzza’s family and extended family in St. Bernard devastated. In total, they lost 11 houses. He was forced to close his business and help his family in the months and years following the storm, delaying the reconstruction of his own house on Esteban Street. The State denied his first grant application, and he had just about given up hope of restoration when he received a second round grant in the fall of 2007. “Katrina taught me that I can do just about anything,” says Mr. Liuzza. “But you’ve got to help yourself a little bit too. Pull up your boot straps and do it.”

Mr. Liuzza’s observations are typical of the approach to problems taken by residents of this close-knit neighborhood, where long ties to family and friends and an independent spirit sustain the residents as they continue to rebuild more than four years after Katrina hurled them into chaos.



## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING AND RESEARCH:

- Arabi Historic District National Register Nomination. 1998. Website: <http://www.crt.state.la.us/hp/nhl/parish44/scans/44006001.pdf> (Accessed August 2009)
- Federal Writers Project. “Louisiana: A Guide to the State.” Website: <http://books.google.com/books?id=IOSvZYL3tMC&lpg=PP1&pg> (Accessed August 2009).
- The Saint Bernard Voice. Website: <http://www.thestbernardvoice.com/> (Accessed August 2009).
- The Butchers’ Benevolent Association of New Orleans • The Crescent City Live-Stock Landing and Slaughter-House Company. 83 U.S. 36 (1872) Website: <http://supreme.justia.com/us/83/36/case.html> (Accessed August 2009).